

The Outreach Advisory Council: Another Step Towards Outreach Success

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In a previous issue of *Alabama's TREASURED Forests* magazine, the commitment of the Alabama Forestry Commission (AFC) to the underserved forest landowners of Alabama was explained, and the necessity and basis for an Outreach program was established. At that time, four Outreach Foresters had been hired - one for each of the agency's regions - to work with the underserved forest landowners of the state. However, to enhance the efforts of these Outreach Foresters and to succeed exponentially, other "key players" needed to be involved in the program.

In the early part of 2001, State Forester Timothy C. Boyce established an Outreach Advisory Council to assist with the Commission's outreach efforts. The council consists of two underserved forest landowners from each region and two others at large that have demonstrated a commitment to sustainable forestry and an interest in community involvement. In addition there are also representatives from Tuskegee University, Alabama A&M University, Auburn University, the USDA Forest Service, the US Corps of Engineers, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, and the Alabama Forestry Commission. The collaboration of such a diverse group can better achieve the common goal of outreach efforts.

To prioritize all of the ideas and activities, the Outreach Advisory Council identified three objectives. The first is to create an atmosphere of trust between the AFC and the underserved forest landowners. To accomplish this particular goal, the council will establish opportunities for the landowners and the Commission to communicate in a comfortable, timely, and consistent manner. Second, the council will assist the AFC in reaching out to these landowners by providing feedback to the Commission about the true effectiveness and priority areas of the program. The third objective is that the council will stimulate interest

and encourage participation of the underserved forest landowners in sustainable forest management practices by conveying to them the AFC's interest, understanding, and commitment to their land management needs.

At the council's initial meeting at Tuskegee University, it was decided that there would be at least four meetings a year - one in each region of Alabama, at a location identified by the council mem-



Landowner Gwinn R. Ezell of Hale County measures diameter of pine tree.

bers from that region. These meetings will be structured, but informal, with two sessions. Once the location has been chosen, the council will develop guidelines for its organization and activities. The council will encourage landowners to talk about the Alabama Forestry Commission's outreach efforts in their regions by identifying successes and areas in need of improvement. The council will also obtain information on the Commission's state and regional activities and strategic plan. The council will encourage feedback and advice about such activities from the underserved forest landowners. Finally, the council will

consider issues of recruitment and retention of minority employees in the AFC.

The meetings are well planned and usually coordinated around a forestry-related event such as the Tuskegee Farmer's Conference or the Federation of Southern Cooperatives' Annual Meeting. One particularly successful meeting was held at Auburn University's Hotel and Conference Center. It was strategically scheduled right before the Annual TREASURE Forest Landowner's Conference to encourage the council members to also attend the conference. At this Advisory Council Meeting, several invited guests gave presentations about their outreach efforts in the underserved communities of Alabama. The AFC's Assistant State Forester explained the Forestry Commission's strategic plan and each AFC Regional Forester explained the status of outreach accomplishments in his region. Additionally, the AFC Assistant Regional Foresters of Programs explained future plans for Outreach.

Another meeting was held at the Solon Dixon Center near Andalusia, Alabama. Important issues were discussed such as the progress of Alabama A&M University's Silvopasture Project, the stage of the Alabama Forestry Commission's Outreach Report, the development of an accurate minority landowners list, and the establishment of the new Forest Landowners Enhancement Program (FLEP).

Now, two years after the establishment of the Outreach Advisory Council, there is a general feeling that the meetings have been very successful. Many of the council members attend regularly and give positive feedback about the Commission's outreach efforts. The members are enthusiastically interested in participating and accomplishing the objectives of the Outreach program. ☸